Assessment of the Planning and Decisionmaking Process

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Until the past several years, the transit decisionmaking process in Seattle was unique among the nine cases because it took place outside the official channels of government. The preeminent role of Forward Thrust, an organization composed of civic and business leaders, raised questions of accountability even though the participants represented a broad range of Seattle's interest groups and public spokesmen. With the disbandment of Forward Thrust in **1970 and the successful short-range bus proposal** in **1972, transit planning responsibilities passed** to the more conventional forum provided by the transit agency Metro and the regional council of governments. However, that forum has been troubled by conflict over decisionmaking prerogatives. Recent events demonstrate that the city still exerts a major influence over regional decisionmaking, and that the Governor may be becoming a more important participant.

Forum for Decisionmaking

The history of transit planning and decisionmaking in Seattle has been played out within the context of movements for civic improvements, primarily due to the influence of Jim Ellis. Ellis, although he has never held office in any major official position, was the creative force behind two of the three organizations that have provided the forum for transit decisionmaking in Seattle. (He was involved with Metro and Forward Thrust; less so with the Puget Sound Governmental Conference.)

Improved public transportation was one of Ellis' original goals by the time of the first referendum vote on Metro in 1957. Although voters gave Metro power over water treatment, they refused to grant transit authority. Subsequently, as the State Highway Commission and the Puget Sound Regional Transportation Study continued to stress auto transportation, a series of citizens' committees was developed to provide more suitable forums for transit advocacy. After another attempt to empower Metro to deal with transit failed in **1962,** transit advocates turned to the city of Seattle and PSGC. The new transit forces flexed their muscles when the DeLeuw, Cather transit plan they had influenced the city to commission, met the highway-oriented Puget Sound *Regional* Transportation Study (PSRTS) with the result that the head of the PSRTS left the Seattle area under city pressure.

In calling for the establishment of Forward Thrust in **1965, Ellis once again surfaced as a moving force in creating a new institutional mechanism (as he had** done in Metro). Although these two institutions differed vastly in form, purpose, and authority, they were alike in that they both were designed to achieve the momentum necessary to effect Ellis' goals (although neither actually has the authority to do so directly). By **1968, Forward Thrust, which considered transit the key to its effort, was making the basic transit decisions in the Seattle area.**

Over a period of time the Puget Sound Governmental Conference (PSGC) began to seek a stronger role. There were several structural problems with the PSGC. Its four-county jurisdiction was too broad and contained too many diverse interests to reflect any concrete power base, and it lacked the abilit$_y$ to tax. Its strength was derived from Federal acts that gave it the responsibilit$_y$ for review, regionwide coordination, preparation of a comprehensive plan, 3-C transportation plannin$_g$ responsibilities, and A-95 responsibilit$_y$ for reviewing fundin$_g$ applications.

Although PSGC (now PSCOG) has been gaining recognition as a forum, it was Metro that gained the support of Seattle's political leadership as the key transit organization after the termination of Forward Thrust. Metro has certain structural advantages over PSCOG. It has the means to carry out plans, once approved, and a **membershi$_p$ more** cohesive than PSCOG's because it is limited to the more immediate Seattle metropolitan area (King County). As of 1973, it became the sole transit operator in the Seattle area, with the power and the tax base to implement transit improvements.

Although the PSGC and Metro signed a cooperative agreement that attempted to spell out their respective roles in 1974, rivalry between the two agencies continues, especially in the area of long-range transit system planning. PSCOG claims a lead role in long-range planning because it wants to strengthen the relationship between transit and land use planning (which is its responsibility); Metro claims a lead role because it wants long-range plans to reflect technological considerations (because they affect transit operations and cost, which are at the center of Metro's concerns).

Evidence that PSGC is not an agreed-upon forum is provided by the fact that it became necessary to establish a new mechanism for allocation of Federal Urban Systems highway funds. PSGC wanted a major role in the allocation of these funds. Metro did not seek the basic role but proposed a special board. The Urban Systems Board, for which PSGC provided the staff, was accepted by the Highway Commission on the condition that it be advisory. The mayor, the King County executive, and other major elected officials participate on the board, and it seems to be working well: about **50 percent of the Urban** Systems money for the area is now being allocated to transit projects.

The recent proposal to package a downtown bus subway in a revised plan for Interstate **90 reflects another level of conflict, this one involving the center city interests on the one hand, and the rural and suburban interests on the other hand.** The conflict had been implicit in the earlier developments in Seattle's transit planning. The two plans developed under the leadership of Forward Thrust emphasized the importance of downtown revitalization, and they were strongly backed by Seattle's political leadership. In contrast, the plan approved in **1972 was developed under the guidance from the Puget Sound Governmental Conference and proposed relatively higher levels of service to rural and suburban areas (and less than maximum service to the CBD).** The I-90 plan differs from these earlier plans because it is more limited and CBD-oriented in scope. Inasmuch as the plan would directly affect regional transportation, however, it can be considered a regional issue. Nevertheless, the plan was shaped behind closed doors by the mayor and the Governor. PSCOG, the federally designated forum for transportation planning, was not informed of the project until the proposal had been developed.

Accountability of Decisionmakers

For a long time, Seattle businessmen and community leaders dominated transit planning through quasi-governmental channels. There was little direct accountability to voters. Accountability to decisionmakers increased when Metro and PSGC became the dominant forces in transit planning after **1970, although the city has continued to exert an important influence.**

Forward Thrust, the most long-lived of the quasi-governmental groups of civic activists and businessmen, has been termed a vigilante government—a perhaps overly pejorative term considering that it worked largely in the open, made attempts to include all major opinion-shapers and established interest groups and generally carried on its work through high minded volunteers who saw themselves as working in the public interest. Nonetheless, Forward Thrust was basically an elite group performing functions and making decisions that are normally considered the responsibility of government.

One question of accountability arose over the issue of whom Forward Thrust represented. An examination of the membership of the Forward Thrust Committee of 200 shows that a majority of the participants were from the downtown business community. Labor, the university community, and various conservative groups all at some time opposed what some considered "an organization of organization men." Forward Thrust's proposals tended to give priority to CBD routes most vital to downtown business.

Today the two organizations that compete for decisionmaking authority **(Metro and PSCOG) are** more accountable to the voter because they are governed primarily by elected officials, because their meetings are open and publicized, and because their decisionmaking processes are governed by rules that assure a formal opportunity for public involvement (e.g., public hearings). **Metro is** governed by a 37-member council, composed of the King County executive and the nine county commissioners, the mayor of Seattle and the nine city councilmen, another official of the city, six representatives of cities over **15,000 in population, six persons from unincorporated areas of King County, one representative from cities** in the county with populations of less than **15,000, one delegate from Metro's component sewer districts, and a chairman elected by other members of the**

Metro council.[32] The PSCOG has an executive board comprised of the conference chairman, the vice chairman, and not fewer than one representative from each member county, one from each member central city, and two representatives from the combined membership. [33]

Metro is more representative, more closely approximating the one-man one-vote concept, while PSCOG's votes are distributed fairly evenly to each member unit of government. Metro is dominated by the city, and, because its concern has always been with the city, it tends to support transit plans that provide greater service to the core area.

The PSCOG board, also composed of elected officials, gives more voice to areas outside the city. Therefore it is not surprising to find that it tends to move in the direction of a bus system more suitable for large, fairly low-density areas than a rail transit system.

A final issue of accountability of the transit planning process in the past has been the tendency to enlarge proposed new systems to provide service to all voters. The plans presented in the **1968 and 1970 referenda proposed extensive transit systems** in an attempt to lure the vote in all corridors of the city and suburban areas. However, analysis of the vote shows that many suburban areas did not support the transit proposals because they felt they were getting less than their share of service.

Public Involvement

Community participation programs have become increasingly concerned with involving citizens from the beginning in the early stages of the planning process.

During the campaign before the 1968 referendum, Forward Thrust kept in touch with citizens through telephone surveys, doorbelling, and presentations to local groups. The strength of the **1968 program was its intensity. It was easy to get access to information about the Thrust Proposals. Its drawback was that it was not a true community involvement approach but an attempt to "sell" an idea to a passive public.**

During the second (1970) campaign, Forward Thrust held meetings in **16 separate communities.** The two important points resulting from these meetings both had to do with short-term transit improvements. Citizens stressed the need to provide adequate transportation service in areas that would not be served by rail. They also stressed the importance of providing immediate bus service improvements while the regional rail system was under construction. While the plan presented to voters in **1970 reflected these recommendations—it included short-term** bus improvements and more extensive bus coverage than had been proposed in **1968—it** nevertheless went too far in the opposite direction—with a proposal for an expensive rail system—to win the necessary votes.

The drawback **of the 1970 program was that citizen input into the planning process was primarily limited to refining the rail plan. This indicates a major weakness of the Forward Thrust approach generally,** when viewed from the standpoint of current standards. Forward Thrust was not an unbiased funnel for citizen input. It was a private organization with a well-defined goal of providing Seattle with a rail transit system.

Following the rejections of the rail plan in **1968 and 1970, the consultants preparing the 1972 plan carried out an extensive effort to get community participation into the process.** The Metro Transit Liaison Committee, composed of appointed public officials, transportation agency personnel, and representatives of areawide citizen and civic groups, advised policy makers at their semimonthly public meetings. This committee, which met throughout the study, was supplemented by additional citizen participation through community meetings held in each of **10** areas of the county. These attempted to involve citizens in the planning process from the beginning. Community input was enlisted in five phases of the planning process: goal formulation, alternative system selection, tentative recommended plan, the recommended plans and the recommended financial plan, and phasing. The effort paid off when voters approved the plan in the **1972 referendum.**

Citizen involvement in the transit planning process today is more widespread but also more diffuse, since each major participating agency or unit of government—Metro, PSCOG, City of Seattle, WSHD, and King County—has its own citizen involvement program. However, since the forum for transit decisionmaking is not well defined and competition among many of these

32 Colcord, op. cit., 71.

33 Ibid., p. 72.

agencies continues, it is difficult to say how or when a participation program will be incorporated into decisionmaking.

TECHNICAL PLANNING PROCESS

Goals and Objectives

Forward Thrust lent to Seattle's transit movement a vision of the goal to be achieved through mass transit. It sought to provide a high capacity transit system as one of the means to improve the region's business and cultural center. In the words of James Ellis, "Transportation facilities . . . (are) a useful tool for urban design."[34] Ellis was explicit about the nature of the environment he sought to achieve: a pattern "which permits both open space and dense development . . . (a pattern) of high-rise structures and . . . grade-separated . . . transportation."[35] The interest in transit Ellis gave to Forward Thrust stemmed from a well-defined vision of the city.

By **1970, Forward Thrust's vision was badly** in need of repair. Huge layoffs at Boeing had turned Seattle from a prosperous city into one of near-depression. Yet Forward Thrust's transit program, instead of economizing, got a little larger and more expensive. One of the strongest arguments that Forward Thrust's opponents voiced during the **1970 campaign was that the transit plan was based on overly optimistic growth projections.**

Some aspects of controversy over Forward Thrust's goals centered on the strongly implied assumption that what was good for the downtown business community was good for Seattle. The two rail plans had provided priority rail service to CBD-oriented trips; public transportation for most other trips was not to be improved. In the **1972 plan, this bias disappeared as the goal of serving the downtown business community lost its preeminence.**

Development and Evaluation of Alternatives

The evaluation of alternatives in Seattle's two major rail transit planning studies assumed overly optimistic population projections, especially for the CBD. This fact, coupled with lack of serious consideration of low-capital bus alternatives, led to overly extensive, CBD-focused rail proposals,

The predictions of rapid growth for the Seattle area, based on the projected employment of the Boeing Company, were reasonable when they first were used in **1967. However, the Boeing work force, which grew from 60,000 in 1966 to 93,000** in **1967 and 101,000** in **1969, plummeted in January 1971 to 46,800.**[36] **One of the mandates of the 1970 DeLeuw, Cather plan was to take into** account this population growth. It is ironic that by the time this contract was let, the decline had begun. The overblown population forecasts were much berated by critics **of the 1970 transit plan. However, these outdated projections were used to project densities heavy enough to justify rail routes, a practice that led to an overly extensive system designed to be attractive to the suburbs. By 1972, the PSGC developed data that indicated a much slower growth** in the region.

In the first two studies, the growth forecasts favored systems that offered service to the CBD. It was an explicit goal of the **1967 study to design a transit system that would serve the CBD, and the study assumed a large percentage of the region's trips would be oriented to the CBD.** The **1970 plan, although it proposed 240** more miles of busway, did not substantially change this focus on the CBD.

A group of professors at the University of Washington questioned this orientation, arguing that the projections assumed too high a concentration of employment, particularly in the downtown, and that the system would primarily benefit downtown landowners and higher-income commuters from distant suburbs, who would be using the system to get to work downtown.

Another shortcoming of the first two studies was their failure to seriously consider low-cost bus alternatives to the rail systems. Alternatives analysis was in many aspects limited to a comparison of the automobile as the alternative to rail, with no mention of a bus option. When all three modes were compared, the bus system used for comparison was essentially the existing system, with no major improvements. The bus system was judged preferable to the rail system from a cost standpoint but was considered unacceptable in other ways. The report pictured buses hampered by downtown congestion unless exclusive bus lanes were provided and then never mentioned the possibility of bus lanes again. This stood out in

34 Ellis, op. cit., p. 5.

35 Ibid., p. 6.

36 Co[cord, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

sharp contrast to the optimistic estimates of riders attracted by comfortable and fast rail service.

DeLeuw, Cather's 1970 plan included a long **discussion of alternatives. After mentioning many possible systems, the report settled on four for further analysis: buses** in mixed traffic, all-bus **system with metered freeways, all-bus system with busways, and combined bus and rail rapid transit. However, all the less costly solutions were discarded, and it was assumed, without apparent justification, that the** only feasible bus solution would require grade-separated rights-of-way in the five major activity centers in order to avoid serious conflicts with other transportation modes. This skyrocketed the cost of a bus system to over **$350 million** more than the rail system.

The capital costs were assumed to be the same for the busrail system and the all-busway system, but operating costs were higher for the busway (this was partially due to the assumption that labor costs were expected to inflate at a greater rate than other costs).

Other technical questions about the thoroughness of **the 1970 analysis of rail alternatives were raised by analysis done by volunteer technicians under guidance from a Boeing executive. Their studies** showed the possibility of reducing the costs of a rail system as much as **25 percent if alternative lighter vehicle types of technology were used. This information would have carried far greater weight had it** been part of the material made available by Forward Thrust; as it was, Forward Thrust opposed public discussion of the issue. This reluctance reflects poorly on the quality of work on evaluation of alternatives.

The **1972 study examined only bus alternatives because it was felt that** only a bus system could get the required voter approval for its funding. The limitation of the study to relatively low-capital alternatives did not imply a permanent rejection of more costly fixed-guideways alternatives—this study was clearly defined as a short-range transit improvement plan. But for the short-term, two bus systems were examined: a CBD-oriented system and a multicenter concept. The first system was able to generate more transit trips to the CBD **(52,891 versus 52,164) but the multicenter system generated** more transit trips to almost every other location and generated a much larger total number of transit trips **(190,376 versus 245,250). The CBD-focused system generated much** more revenue and had a much smaller operating deficit but cost almost **$29 million** more in capital costs (parking spaces, freeway stops, more bus lanes, and an additional CBD terminal). The multicenter concept was chosen as a result of this thoroughly competent analysis.

A final characteristic of each of the alternatives analyses in Seattle was their lack of breadth. As was customary for analysis in its time, there was no evaluation of environmental impacts and little of the economic impact of the proposed transit systems. The bulk of the analysis concerned transit ridership figures or costs.

Financing and Implementation

The expection of Federal funds probably has influenced Seattle's transit planners to design more expensive systems than they would have otherwise. The necessity of providing local matching funds through bond issues on sales tax also has influenced the transit system design.

Seattle's two proposals for rail systems (in **1968 and 1970) were formulated in the expectation that UMTA would provide two-thirds of the cost, with local funding providing the other third. A number of critics, among them the group of professors from the University of Washington who had opposed the 1970 rail system proposal, claimed that the promise of UMTA money encouraged planners to design overly expensive transit** systems. The expectation of Federal money has also been a dominant factor in the design of rapid transit systems since **1970. In 1972, it was a conscious policy to propose a bus system instead of a rail system because UMTA was enthusiastic about bus systems. (This strategy was proven effective** when UMTA reacted by approving the largest bus system improvement grant in its history.) The availability of Federal money continues to be a dominant influence on mass transit in the Seattle region: the current flurry of alternative transit schemes is a direct result of the potential of using Federal highway money (from I-**90) for transit purposes.**

In Seattle, the issue of Federal funds has until 1972 been academic because of the planners' inability to raise local matching funds through bonding. Local financing considerations have had as much or **more influence on the extent and** mode of proposed transit systems as has Federal action.

The need for **60 percent of the voters to approve bonding to finance the local matching funds for the rapid rail transit proposals of 1968 and 1970**

influenced the design of the proposals. One of the reasons for enlarging the two-line system originally proposed in **1965 was to attract voters who** otherwise would not have been served. This plan backfired when the extensive system presented to voters was opposed because it was too expensive.

The proposed bus improvement plan of 1972 won nearly 60 percent of the voters (although only **50 percent was needed).** The vote showed that a short-term plan designed to meet an immediate need was more effective in attracting support than an extensive long-term system had been.